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funding.
Private donations
 NEA spokesperson Cherie Simon pointed to the recent \$22 million in private donations to the Detroit Symphony Orchestra as an example of an effective public-private partnership.

Many arts groups receive seed money from public agencies such as the NEA, or the Michigan Council for Arts and Cultural Affairs. Individual artist grants from the NEA were eliminated in the early 1990s.

Since the NEA's budget has been reduced nearly 60 percent to current level of \$98 million, local arts groups are more reliant on state funds.

In the past year, the state council for arts has allocated \$21 million to arts programs around the state. Meanwhile, in 1996 the NEA awarded \$902,800 to Michigan arts groups. In addition, the council received \$1.2 million from the NEA for its operating budget.

While corporate donors and public grant agencies are impressed with the popularity of an arts project or arts group, the trap is that appeal is substituted for quality, said Susanne Hilber-

ry, owner/director of the Susanne Hilber Gallery in Birmingham.
 "There's a competition for a mass audience," she said. "That shouldn't be the way to educate people or determine what's meaningful art."

Yet because of funding challenges, many public institutions, such as the Detroit Institute of Arts, must justify public grants by pointing to attendance figures. If that's the case, the record-breaking attendance at the current "Splendors of Ancient Egypt" should please grantors.

"It's one thing for those of us in the arts to talk about how the arts contribute to society," said Maurice Parrish, deputy director of the DIA. "But it carries much more weight if the people we serve read 'American Canvases' and stand up to be heard."

And when that happens across metro Detroit, the Midwest and from coast to coast, then maybe "American Canvases" can be called the catalyst for a grassroots movement.

For many in the arts, it's about time the gestation period moved to the next stage.
 While viewpoints varied, the

panel was unanimously optimistic that "American Canvases" would open a broader debate about the arts.

Tooling for change

"It should be used as a tool," said Barbara Kratchmer, executive director of ArtServe, a statewide arts advocacy group.

The lasting impact of the report, however, will be whether its findings are as relevant next year and the decades to come as they appear today.

"Art has always been a lightning rod for a range of (community, cultural and constitutional) issues and that's not a bad thing," said Simon. "We expect formal discussions based on the report to begin across the country."

Since the report was leaked to *The New York Times*, there's been an unprecedented number of requests for copies. Last week, the NEA received 600 phone calls and another 250 hits on their website per day. Already, a second printing has been planned for the report, which initially appeared in 5,000 softcover editions.

Simon admits to being sur-

prised at the "tidal wave" response. Initial media reports, she said, appeared alarmist, and focused on the finding that "elitist attitudes in the arts" was contributing to the growing alienation with the public.

But Simon contends the report is far from dismal.

She claims it's an assessment of the condition of the arts based on opinions of members of arts groups at forums across the country, especially how communities have successfully integrated the arts by building alliances with the private sector.

The 18-month project included forums in Los Angeles, Salt Lake City, San Antonio, Miami, Columbus, Ohio, Charlotte, North Carolina.

"This isn't about the NEA," said Simon. "We've spent 30 years watching arts groups crop up. Do we want to see that reversed because there's a lack of funding and interest in perpetuating the arts?"

The passionate debate stirred by "American Canvases" presents a conundrum about which historical epoch might repeat itself: Will it be a time of a grassroots citizens movement demanding change? Or is this just another

episode in the ongoing struggle to save/eliminate the NEA?

The comprehensive 193-page document examines the reasons for the growing anxiety about the lack of an infrastructure to support fledgling and established artists and arts groups into the next century.

In short, the combined effect is a growing alienation between those in the arts and the general populace who don't see a direct relation between the arts and their daily lives.

Beyond these issues, the intent of the report is to offer a "call to action," challenging communities to not only support nonprofits but redefine American culture beyond the values set forth by the mainstream entertainment industry and the marketplace.

What sounds like a noble intent to some, however, looks like political posturing to others. Cynics contend that the report coming at the end of NEA chair Jane Alexander's four-year term is a move to consolidate support in the ongoing battle against social conservatives who want to eliminate the NEA, the brainchild and cultural trope of

liberals.

At the dawn of the 20th century, a grassroots movement forced a reluctant federal government to take a more active role in preserving the nation's natural resources. The result was the birth of environmental awareness and the start of protecting national parks, wildlife and wetlands.

The report examines the condition of nonprofit arts while presenting an ambitious agenda: to preserve the American cultural legacy. Ironically, that's a heritage without any clear consensus and littered with controversies that have continually exposed the precarious features of American society.

Before "American Canvases" began to resound throughout the country, it was being hailed as the most historic document from the NEA since the agency was established in 1965. In practical terms, it's more likely that "American Canvases" resembles the mid-1980s in-depth report by the U.S. Department of Education, "A Nation At Risk."

But for now, let the debate begin.

Niagara from page D1

crime guys, I've got my girls," said Niagara, as she channeled her way through the interview. Since her show last year, "All Men Are Created Equal," Niagara has created nearly 40 new works, including several table-top paintings of her devilish female subjects.

Niagara's vibrantly painted cartoonish characters with pithy, biting comments are a '90s version of Roy Lichtenstein's pop art with an in-your-face attitude. A mood, Niagara puts succinctly as: "If I want your opinion I'll beat it out of you."

That may sound confrontational, but it's an attitude with a popular audience.

Niagara's "girls" are strong personalities straight out of

"Thelma and Louise," "Waiting to Exhale" and "First Wives Club." Painted in electric purples, violets and flat tones, the images of women pointing guns, holding cigarettes and falling out of their plunging necklines aren't just subjects of male fantasies, but of women's liberation.

Revenge is only the beginning. Total control, now that's closer to the soul of the artist. Yet in her less-guarded moments, when she drops the Niagara persona, the woman behind the Ray Bans

reveals an unexpected vulnerability.

Favorite points to one of her favorite paintings, "Don't Bleed on the Carpet," which has a woman yielding a bloody knife with the remark, "Oups."

"I can't believe some people would be offended by this," she said. "People look at violence and everything that's offensive on TV, and would be insulted by a painting?"

To look for anything beyond

the shocking hues and Niagara's tough-girl, tongue-in-cheek posturing, would miss the point: her work might resemble Lichtenstein's early art, but she's straight from the Andy Warhol school of pop art. For Niagara is foremost a performance artist.

Celebrity, but girlishly noir paintings and her persona as a "bad girl" are inseparable. In five years, she's gone from underground rock singer, to international artist with exhibits in Los Angeles, Chicago, Atlanta and

New York, and a growing audience for her art in Europe, England and Japan.

Strangely, the stylish low life of noir reflected in the work of Lauren, Stone and Niagara just might be one of the most popular American genre exports. As a self-proclaimed psycho-pop artist, don't be fooled by Niagara's devil-may-care stance.

The sultry woman behind the Ray Bans knows just what she's doing.

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museums would call it art. If anything can be art, then there's no power in art."

Ironically, that sounds more like the position of cultural conservatives than an avant-garde artist. But in Bourgeois's hall of mirrors, only art can make people aware of its inherent ineptitudes and deceptions.

Eventually, the cat stops chasing its own tail.

Fiction or reality?

Last spring, MCA's exhibit, "Naked in the 90s," documented

A lady clutching a Bible visit-

ed the exhibit. She threatened to have the show closed. The mild-mannered Bourgeois captured his prey. For hours, he engaged the woman in a discussion about what she found offensive, less offensive. And inevitably, what she might consider as "art."

A few days later, the woman returned, not with the authorities, but with a group of similar minded friends. They examined the exhibit. And many began to better understand the "line" between exploitation, self-obsession and art.

"The power of art allows for dialogue," said Bourgeois. "Whether it's an inner dialogue or a broader societal discussion. Art is about interaction. That's why art is never finished."

And why art, like life, is a work in progress. Seldom clear, and inherently ambiguous. No authorities are in sight.

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